

Q: Good afternoon. Today is March 1st, 2016. My name is Lauren Miller and I am here at Newton City Hall with Peter Neumann. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So, Peter, what were you doing before you entered the service?

A: Well, I entered the service in 1969, and I lived in Newington, Connecticut. I was a college student in New Britain, Connecticut at Central Connecticut State College. I graduated from college in June of 1969, June 7th. I got married in the following June 14th, went on a honeymoon, and then when I returned I had my notice of conscription, draft. So I don't know if you know what draft is or conscription is, but it's where the government required at that time young men who were healthy to serve in the military. And that had been going on, I think, since World War Two. The Vietnam War was going on. It was very politically charged. There were demonstrations. There were street events, street riots sometimes at the Democratic Convention the preceding year, and there was a lot of resistance to the war and a lot of young men didn't want to go in.

So, what I was doing was graduating from college. I had a part time job. I worked as a psychiatric aide at a mental health hospital in Hartford, Connecticut, which is where I grew up and where I went to school. My studies were in psychology at the time. And I only bring that up because there was a lot of talk amongst the psychiatric aides about how were we going to avoid the draft or what should we do, should we avoid the draft. And for me the job was a part time job. I wanted to get a regular job after I graduated and I couldn't. None of the employers were really interested in me, because I had an unresolved status military status. They didn't want to invest time in training somebody. So I didn't know what I was going to do.

In fact after I graduated I had converted from a part time aide to a full time aide at this mental hospital and the different aides there were saying, "Well, you can go to Canada. I think I might go to Canada." That's what they said, but a lot of that was just talk. But one interesting story

came to mind was one aide said, "Well, you can fail the draft physical if you stand up for 48 hours. And what it will do," I have no idea if this is true or not, "what it will do is it will raise the albumin level in your blood and then when they draw a blood test just the chemicals will be off." And I wasn't about to do that. I wasn't about to go to Canada.

Anyway, when I got back from my honeymoon I had my notice for my draft physical and I went to New Haven, Connecticut, and that was probably in July, and then by early September I was in the army, I was drafted. I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey. And right around that time, because of the resistance to the war, they came and they knew the impact it had on young men, they came up with an idea of a draft lottery where they would pull numbers and if you were a low number you were bound to go, and low would be, I guess, under 180, and if you were a high number well then you didn't have to worry about it and you could go on with your life. And then there were reserve units, military reserve units, and in the Vietnam War the reserve units weren't called up, nor was the National Guard, as they are now in Afghanistan and Iraq, so I had tried to get into a reserve unit. I had my name in the waiting list. And I was in the army in early September at Fort Dix and there for about three or four weeks when they had the lottery. And my birthday would have been a high number, I wouldn't have been drafted, but it was too late. And then my wife got a notice that I had been accepted into the reserve unit, but that was a moot point, so there I was.

And that's basically what I was doing.

Q: And where exactly did you serve? Do you remember arriving?

A: I first served basic training, which was about eight or nine weeks from September until about mid-November, that was in Fort Dix in New Jersey, and then I was assigned as an infantryman and trained in Fort McClellan, Alabama. I was there from November until probably the end of January and then I was sent to Vietnam in early February. Actually I went AWOL when I finished my infantry training. We had gotten a leave right around Christmastime. We had five

days leave while we were in training, and this was in 1969, and then came back to finish up our training, and then were told that we had to report directly from Fort McClellan, Alabama to Oakland Army Terminal, I guess, Army Base to fly over to Vietnam. And I didn't like it. Me and a lot of the other guys didn't like it. So we, I just went home. I went home for about three or four days and then reported to Oakland. And I didn't think it was any big deal at the time. What were they going to do to me, send me to Vietnam, I'm going there anyway. But they were very angry and they fined me \$50 dollars and I washed pots and pans in Oakland for about a week before I got on a plane and went over to Vietnam.

And there I landed, as did everybody, they landed in one of a couple of places. The place I landed in was, or ended up in was Long Bin Replacement Depot, and there until you were assigned to a unit you were given special duties, and there were men coming in every hour of every day and they would be assigned to these special duty units until your name was called and you were sent to a unit. And you would work, they would have like a rollcall, a muster where they got all of the people together every eight hours, and you would be assigned a job, so you would work and then you would finish and then they would have another muster and they would assign you to another job, and so you would do that. And then by the third job you had been doing it for about 16 hours, and you were saying, "Well, I need to sleep." And of course that was thought to be a scam, people, they didn't believe you, and you would try to work your way around that.

I had volunteered while I was there to be a helicopter gunner and then I had to wait another few more days with this 24 hour cycle of duty. And then I did get assigned and I went to an army airfield called Phu Hiep Army Airfield, which was in the coast of South Vietnam, about, I don't know if you know the country, but it was what was then called two corps, one corps was below, right at the demilitarized zone, two corps was the area below it, three corps, then four corps was the southernmost area. So I was assigned there and I was assigned as a helicopter gunner.

Q: Can you tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences?

A: Well, there were a few memorable, a few memorable experiences. Let's see. I had written down a few things in preparation. In my duties there I was, the company I was assigned to was a helicopter gunship company, and this company was armed with rockets, rocket launchers I mean, and heavy machine guns, and they had a gunner and a crew chief on each side of the helicopter, and one man was the gunner and the crew chief also had a gun on the other side. And I had a few missions doing that, and my scores on my entrance tests in the military were pretty good, so they didn't want me to be flying, they wanted me to manage flight operations radio, so I did that and I didn't fly as many missions as I thought I was going to fly.

And I had other jobs. I would have to go out on the perimeter at night and then if we got attacked I would have to be a part of a reaction force to see if anybody was staying, any Viet Cong were staying, hiding out and trying to do some mayhem. But I had a couple of, one of the duties I had was patrolling on something called the rat patrol. And what it was is there was a TV series in the 1960s about a World War Two unit in the desert in Egypt, and these actors or these characters in this series were all ruffians and likeable fellows and they would go on these missions on a Jeep, and they would ride in and they would eliminate a lot of the German enemy and without ever getting hurt. The rat patrol where I was was we had to drive around in a Jeep amongst the helicopters at night, looking for any infiltrators, any Viet Cong infiltrators, and it was a terrible, terrible mission. We couldn't leave the lights off, because they didn't want us to bang into any helicopters, whoever was driving it, so we had to leave the lights on, which meant that everybody knew exactly where you were at night. And of course the sound of the engine of the Jeep, you could hear that. We had to go very slow and we had a radio that if we saw everything we were supposed to say, "Here we are. We saw this." And the radio was always squawking.

And in the rat patrol I was not the driver, I was the shotgun position next to the driver with my rifle, and driving up and down and we're grouching about all this, and just talking normally,

because what difference did it make, we were making so much noise. We come around the corner and there is a man standing there with a rifle pointed right at me, and the driver stops and he says, "Don't move. I know this guy." And it was another American soldier who was all drugged up and he was in some kind of a place outside of his head. And he heard the Jeep and thought it was something that he should aim his rifle at.

And there were a lot of problems with drugs in Vietnam at that time. They were, drugs were easy to come by. The Vietnamese sold, I don't know of any opium that they sold, but they sold marijuana cigarettes that looked, that were packaged just like Marlboro cigarettes. In fact they had cellophane on the cartons and very cheap, and people would use those drugs, and some people would get opium. So anyway, the driver kind of talked this fellow down. He knew him, knew who he was, and he just turned, the guy with the rifle just turned around and wandered off, and that was an interesting experience.

I had to man the radio for the flight operations, which meant that units would call in, they would need assistance, they would need helicopter support because they were under attack, and then they would call in and then I would ring the ready room of the pilots and they would come, and I would have to have the coordinates ready and give them to them, and then they would take off and try and help out that unit that was in trouble.

But it was mostly a quiet job. I mean these things didn't happen all the time. They happened some of the time, but not all of the time. So I would just be sitting there, and it was very hot and humid in Vietnam. Even though it was on the coast it was very close to the jungle.

And I'm sitting there in a chair that I had outside and I'm smoking my pipe and I thought, "Well I better go write a letter home. I've been putting it off. I've got to go write home." And I go into the building, operations shack where the radio was where there was a table in front of the radios and an area where I could write, so I'm not in there for a minute when the Viet Cong launched

mortars and rockets right into the area. They were exploding everywhere outside. And I dove under the radio, because if they landed on the roof maybe the table that I was, I could crawl under would give me some protection. And then it went on for I don't know how long, it seemed like a god awful long time, and I could hear men moaning, and it was really upsetting.

And I get up, finally it's all done and everybody rushes down, and they were surprised that I was alright. The pilots knew that they would have a mission immediately and they were just waiting for the coordinates for it. And I go out and that chair that I had been sitting in right outside was just a wreck. It was all mangled. So it was a little bit of good luck that that had happened.

There was a couple of times when the Viet Cong infiltrated and we had groups of men that were a reaction force that were three or four men would have to go and scout out bunkers to see if they were occupied, if anybody was in there. Excuse me.

Q: No problem. Take your time.

A: So, we had different assignments, and I had to go clear out this bunker.

Q: Would you like to take a minute?

A: Maybe I'll pick another story.

Q: We can come back to it.

A: Yeah. I also had to go on guard duty and there were shifts of three of us, and we would go on at night and each one of us would have like four hours, we would go on from probably 7:00 at night to 7:00 in the morning, and then we would split it four hours. So you wanted to get the first shift if you possibly could or the last shift, because if you had the first shift well then you could

kind of tune out and then you would have a chance to sleep more than if you had the second shift, which was the worst one, because you really didn't go to sleep, you're all chitchatting on the first shift, and then it's your duty, and if you had the last shift well then you're just up four hours earlier, actually not even four hours, it would have been less than that.

So I had the last shift of this particular guard duty tour, and the sun is coming up and the post that we had was a tower that we had to climb up, and it overlooked the beach in front of me and then to the left of me was the ocean. And then the village was to the right. And so I'm watching the sun come up. It was really quite peaceful and beautiful. And this man, Vietnamese, comes walking out of the village and he is coming, walking right at my guard tower, and he is not armed, he only had like a, looked like underpants on, and he is walking out, and he is walking right at the guard tower and he keeps coming and coming. And I'm, "[Vietnamese] Go, go away!" And I'm waving and he is still walking forward, forward, forward. And then I didn't know what to do.

So I had to pull the bolt back on my weapon. And he turns around and then defecates, knowing that I can see him plainly, gets up, and he goes back into the village. So he was giving me his statement of what he thought of our presence there. So yeah that was an interesting one.

And then another one in the guard tower was some other time I had the worst shift, the middle one, and then we kept hearing this movement, seeing movement in the dark. We had a scope called a Starlight Scope that magnified available light, and you probably have seen it in movies, and it was, the earlier version was a thick thing and kind of long, and when you looked through it it was only a monocular, but everything you saw was enhanced and it was green and white and you could see things. We would look and we would see these things. And we also had these flares that they looked like bicycle pumps which are long, the old style bicycle pump, long thin cylinder, and you take the cap off and you hit, put that cap on the bottom, and you would hit it and you would shoot up like a miniature fireworks rocket, which was a flare on a little parachute,

and it would light up the area. So we used up all of those and I radioed in, "We need more parachute-- We need more flares." And, "We don't have any. We don't have any."

So, everybody was up at this time and we're looking, and nothing happened at all, no event happened. And I came back, we carried in, we had to turn in all the weapons that we had to be cleaned, and then the guys took out new weapons. And there is a whole carton of these flares, boxes of them there. And I told the Sargent of the Guard, I said, "I called in for flares and you didn't, you had these boxes of them here. Why didn't you give me?" "Well, they're for the next fiscal year. We can't release them now." Well, the goofy things of the military.

And we had, I'll just tell you one other story, we had-- This didn't affect me, but it was kind of a funny story. This fellow, one of his jobs was to bring like classified trash to a dumping area and then burn it and stay there until it burned, and then go back. And he would have to do this every so often and they would give him a Jeep and he would drive out. It was in the complex, the army airfield complex. But while he was out there he also smoked a little bit of grass, and while he was out there he would take his rifle with him and he would shoot at rats there, because there were all kinds of garbage and crap there, and he would shoot at rats and he would smoke his joint and he would shoot at rats. And he comes rushing back, and he has got a bullet hole in the hood of his Jeep and he has to tell why there is a bullet hole in there, so he said there was a sniper that fired at him. And everybody was all riled up, everybody was put on alert. There is not supposed to be anybody in there. They sent up helicopters. They flew up and down the path. They flew all. He had shot a hole in the hood of his Jeep when he was aiming and got kind of mystified about it.

He became a Private and then I think he was a specialist, an E4, and they reduced him to an E1. So anyway. What else have we got here?

Q: What was it like returning to civilian life after the war after you returned?

A: Well, when I flew back I was still in the army, I had about nine months to go, and it was marvelous. The army treated us, the returning soldiers from Vietnam, very well. When we landed, we flew from a place called Cam Ranh Bay, which was also an entrance and an exit point, but it was farther north than from where I had originally flown in, and when we landed in Seattle, Washington they had a red carpet, marched us all off, shook our hands. We went into the mess hall, which was 24 hours, that's where you ate and you could have whatever you wanted, and we had, I had steak and eggs. I think it was the first and last time I ever had it. It was such a huge steak and all these eggs. I couldn't even finish it. And then we got in our uniforms, or we didn't have uniforms, they took our measurements and we got uniforms and they issued them to us. And then I flew home. It was right around Christmastime, 1970, December 21st, 1970.

And it was good, except at the airport there was such a lot of antiwar venom going on that I remember one woman looked at me as if I was a dog turd, just a disgusting look. And we, I never really understood it and don't to this day. We were only doing what the government had required us to do. I mean luckily we came out of it alive, and that was like a low point on a very high that I was on, emotional high that I was on.

So I got home and I had another nine months left in the army and I was sent to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. As I mentioned, I grew up and went to Connecticut where my wife was living, and went there. And it was kind of tough for me. I couldn't wake up. My wife would have to wake me up from the other side of the room. I mean she couldn't lay next to me and nudge me. It would just startle me too much.

The treatment that I had in the military was good. They tried to get experienced soldiers to reenlist, but I didn't really want to do that. I wanted to get on with my life. And I was now able to apply for jobs and I did, and I applied for a job with the government, and I got offered a couple of jobs, and I took one for the Social Security Administration, which I went to after I got

discharged in 1971. But I would have these recurring dreams of being back in Vietnam and I had them for, oh probably until my early 40s, so probably 20 years after, over 20 years after I got back, but it would be an interesting dream. I was going back to Vietnam and whatever age I was at consciousness I would be that age in the dream, so if I was 22 when I first started having them I would be 22 in the dream, if I was 42 I would be 42 in the dream, and I would be saying at different points, "Well, I've already been there. I don't have to go back. You only have to do one tour if you're drafted." And everybody would agree with me, "Yeah you're right, but you've got to. There is nothing we can do. Best bet is write your Congressman, write your Senator." And then the dream would end.

And they finally ended. I divorced my wife after, that I was married to when I was in the service, and then I remarried, and this was in 1993, and remarried, and we went to Bangkok, Thailand for our honeymoon, and my wife had hosted a boatperson back in the mid-'80s, there were Vietnamese that were trying to leave the country, and there was a young teenage girl, somehow she got into a program, this was before we were married, where she hosted a Vietnamese girl for probably three years, this girl became a young woman, got educated, and lived with my wife. She was no longer living with her. She was then, the Vietnamese girl was a young married woman. But anyway when we went to Thailand in 1993 we said, "Let's see if we can go to Vietnam." You couldn't get a visa from the U.S. because diplomatic relations hadn't been established, but you could get a visa from Bangkok, which we did, and then we flew into Saigon which was then called Ho Chi Minh City, and still is called Ho Chi Minh City, and got, well we went through the black market.

When we were in Thailand we got lost driving around in the car and we flagged down another car with Caucasians like ourselves to see if they could help us out, and it was a young married couple who incidentally came from Worcester, Massachusetts. But we told them what our plans were and they said, "Well, if you want to travel anywhere you have to get visas through the black market. Otherwise you'll be stuck in Ho Chi Minh City for the time that you're going to be there,

because the bureaucracy is so bad.” So we did. We went to this café that they recommended and we slipped some money to the owner of it and got visas, and we hired a car and a driver and drove down to the town that the parent of this Vietnamese girl, the mother still lived there, and went to visit her. We brought pictures of the girl. And they treated us like we were Kings, because they put two bottles of 7-Up. It was a status thing so that we had 7-Up. And all of the villagers came around and greeted us.

And then we used the same driver to drive up to the army airfield where I had served. And I knew it from flying over it, but I didn’t know it from the roads. We still found it and I went to the-- There were no buildings left. There were just the roads. And I went to the one corner where that young fellow had come out of the village early one morning while I was on guard duty and went right to that corner, but the tower was long gone. And the people were very friendly. They loved the Americans and they did while we were there, while I was there as a soldier too.

So, that kind of, I don’t know, it was like it closed the door on these dreams. I had a few after that, but not many, and I haven’t had many, any in many, many years. So you forget about the war, because you get on with your life. With my first wife we had a couple of children and were working and eventually moved back to the Massachusetts area in the late ‘70s, and you don’t think about the war, but then it comes back as you get older. I think about it now and wonder how I got so lucky, when 55,000 young men didn’t have that kind of luck, and I try to do service. After I retired my wife and I joined the Peace Corps and went to Africa for a couple of years, and I did some English language work at the Newton Library, helping people who knew English to kind of improve their skills, and now for the past few years I’ve been driving-- I have a disability from my service, a hearing disability from the noise, so I became a member of the DAV, got their magazine, and then they’re looking for volunteer drivers, so I do that. I drive vets that have transportation problems. They can’t get to their VA appointments, so I drive them. I do that.

What else can I tell that?

Q: Anything else that you would like to add?

A: I can't think of anything. Anything else you would like to ask?

Q: What is one more thing that you would like people a hundred years from now to know about your time in the service?

A: Well, it became, I think it became more significant to me as time went on. My children are too old to serve.

Q: Take your time.

A: I hope my grandkids never see war. This is the problem with age. You get too emotional and it never leaves you.

Q: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us.

A: Thank you.

Q: We are really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Program.

A: Well, I hope I helped you out.

Q: You did.

A: And excuse my emotion.

Q: No you're fine.

END OF INTERVIEW